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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 008568

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/29/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KMPI](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: POLITICAL PARTIES IN JORDAN: NOT YET READY FOR
PRIME TIME

REF: A. AMMAN 7979

[1](#)B. AMMAN 6898

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires David Hale for reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) With the exception of the Islamic Action Front, political parties in Jordan are poorly developed and suffer from a lack of both resources and members. They are often driven by personal ambitions, rather than national interests; most are hampered by internal problems. Party leaders will have to abandon old ways and take advantage of new opportunities - including an expected new political parties law - if their organizations are to play a role in Jordan's political development as envisioned by the King. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND

[1](#)2. (U) Since the late King Hussein legalized political parties in 1992, the number of officially recognized parties in Jordan has grown to 33. These parties can roughly be divided into four broad groups: Islamist, leftist, Arab nationalist, and pro-government. The influential Muslim Brotherhood, registered as a charity and social organization, operates through its political arm as the Islamic Action Front (IAF). All other parties are small, disorganized, and have a support base confined to Amman or a specific regional locale. Aside from the IAF, the largest political group is the centrist National Constitutional Party (NCP), which has a little over 800 official members. (NOTE: The Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, Abdul Hadi Majali, is the NCP's General Secretary. END NOTE.) The next largest, with about 600

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members and one representative in parliament, is the Democratic Party of the Left. Of the seven blocs of MPs in the current lower house of parliament, only three have any ties to political parties.

[1](#)3. (C) King Abdullah has publicly stated on several occasions that he would like to see "vibrant" political parties in Jordan. He believes that the current proliferation of small, weak parties is a detriment to political development, and has accordingly challenged parties with similar ideologies to merge together. The National Agenda for reform (ref A), whose release is expected in early November, will reportedly contain recommendations for a new political parties law designed to strengthen parties and promote their consolidation (ref B). Moreover, the Agenda's recommendations for electoral reform would raise the profile of parties by calling for the election of some MPs through votes cast for "national lists" of candidates submitted by political parties (or independent groups). In this context, poloff has spent the last few months meeting with different party leaders, as well as with analysts and others familiar with party politics, to examine the challenges surrounding political party development.

INTERNAL DYNAMICS

[1](#)4. (C) While leaders of political parties often cite external factors for the relative impotence of their organizations, part of the blame stems from internal dysfunctions. One such problem is that many parties are dominated by a single individual or small clique. Party members often join because of their close affiliation with or allegiance to a party leader - sometimes stemming from tribalism - and are content to play a very passive role. Decision-making within most parties is a top-down process that reflects the views of senior party figures only. As a result, party agendas are commonly driven by personal ambitions and narrow individual interests, rather than the needs and desires of the Jordanian public. The focus on personalities also limits cooperation between parties with similar ideologies. For example, eleven centrist parties formed a coalition, dubbed the Jordanian National Movement, in October 2004 in an effort to pursue jointly common

objectives. Less than four months later, however, one of the larger parties (Al-Ahed) had withdrawn, while another party (Al-Rissala) had been suspended. Strong internal disagreements continue to plague the remaining coalition members, who have accomplished little of note beyond issuing a few joint public statements.

15. (C) The lack of broad-based participation within parties has significantly hampered their development of national political platforms. For example, each of the party leaders polioff met with confessed, when asked, that his group had no agreed written program of proposals; most had only statements of vague general principles. Even the IAF, which represents the only strong, organized political force in Jordan, has traditionally failed to present policy positions on many national issues or real programs for governance. (NOTE: Perhaps in response to the National Agenda, the IAF is attempting to address this shortcoming by issuing its own agenda, entitled "An Islamic Program for National Reform," reported septel. END NOTE.) In those few cases where parties are trying to form concrete ideas on issues of national concern, they generally lack the outreach skills needed to engage the public and to attract voters to their ideas.

EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

16. (C) In addition to their own internal problems, most political parties face a number of external obstacles. These include negative public perceptions, lingering fears of government harassment, tribalism and lack of financial resources. In a public opinion poll released by Jordan University's Center for Strategic Studies in October 2004, roughly 90% of respondents surveyed said they did not think that existing political parties were capable of representing their political, social and economic aspirations. Another poll conducted in July 2005 by the Jordan Center for Social Research found that political parties were the least trusted of ten national institutions/organizations presented to respondents. The same poll similarly showed that only 16.7% of respondents believed that political party leaders were "important" in Jordan, while 37% expressed a preference for a one-party system, rather than multiple political parties.

17. (C) Despite the King's public embrace of political parties, some Jordanians still fear possible government retribution against them - or their families - if they become too active in party politics. Older Jordanians well remember how the government imprisoned political activists in the past, as well as the 35-year (1957-1992) prohibition against parties. Many remain concerned that the days of security service pressure on activists might return. Rumors, whether true or not, of current activists being harassed by the intelligence apparatus do nothing to dispel this concern; neither do legal restrictions against party activities on university campuses and elsewhere.

18. (C) Tribalism, which pervades political discourse in much of Jordan, further constrains the growth and effectiveness of parties. Especially in conservative rural areas, some Jordanians will not join a political party unless sanctioned by their tribal leaders. Likewise, strong tribal loyalties may prevent Jordanians from voting for a candidate in an election from outside their tribe even if that candidate closely represents their political beliefs (ref A). (NOTE: Jordan has historically lacked a strong civic education program in its schools to counter these traditional attitudes, though USG-funded programs administered by USAID and Public Affairs at Post are working to change this. END NOTE.)

19. (C) Money, of course, poses another challenge. With no support from the government and a ban on the acceptance of foreign funds, political parties (apart from the IAF) have to rely solely on donations from their members - most of whom have little money to spare - in order to operate. Party activists who are generating good program ideas, including public outreach campaigns, usually are unable to implement them due to a lack of financial resources. The limited funds that are available within a party often come from a handful of individuals with deep pockets, who use their financial leverage to maintain control over the parties' agendas.

WORKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

10. (C) Confronted with these obstacles, it will be a challenge to encourage the development of moderate, effective political party life in Jordan, as the King seems determined to do. Parties will need to work hard to cast off their negative public image and attract more members if they are to convince Jordanians that they are a real force in the

country's political landscape. Parties may have an opportunity to strengthen themselves if a new political parties law, as recommended by the National Agenda (ref B), is adopted. Continued public statements by the GOJ and the King affirming the role of parties, combined with movement on overall political reform, may help by lessening the lingering stigma against political activity. The National Democratic Institute (NDI) is doing good work in this area, through a MEPI-funded program of training and strategic planning workshops aimed at providing party activists with skills and resources to develop platforms, expand their support bases, and conduct effective constituency outreach. Post is also designing a special International Visitor program with Public Affairs Office PASA funds to expose young, promising party members to the workings of political parties in the U.S.

HALE